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Learning a musical instrument online - an experiment in learning to play an instrument using only OERs

Student Dissertation

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WED: Learning a musical instrument online - an experiment in learning to play an instrument using only OERs. (Sarah Sneddon)

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For many people, learning to play a musical instrument is a deeply-held ambition. Unfortunately, various barriers exclude some from realising this dream. These barriers include: geographical location, the lack of a suitable teacher, financial constraints, time constraints and specific learning difficulties. Many instrumental teachers do not accept that there is any possible substitute for face-to-face individual teaching. For the reasons listed above, however, this 'ideal' scenario is not open to all potential learners. In recent years Open Educational Resources, designed to teach an instrument, have become widely available. My project is an experiment in using OERs to learn to play a musical instrument and my presentation is an account of this experiment and its findings.

There has been limited previous examination of learning to play an instrument online. What has been done focuses on the establishment of communities of learners rather than the effectiveness and inclusiveness of the pedagogy. Equally, while there are many ethnographic studies about learning to play a musical instrument, these have not focused on using only open resources. This being the case, my presentation focuses on a question which has received limited up attention until now – can a student learn to play an instrument using only open, online resources and is this a way of making instrumental teaching more inclusive?

My experiment involved learning to play the lever harp. I began the experiment as a complete beginner on this instrument and set myself a time frame of eight weeks. Practice time was limited to twenty minutes a day and my only resources for learning were OERs. By imposing a narrow definition of OERs, I restricted myself to accessing only resources that cost nothing to use. The OERs included teaching videos posted on YouTube, harp makers' websites, harp fora and websites which are repositories for free downloadable music. I engaged with both learners and teachers on the fora, both reading historical posts and starting new threads. Each of my practice sessions concluded with a brief video blog discussing what I was learning as well as documenting my thoughts about the inclusiveness of the material I was using. These videos will be edited to create a short documentary that aims to show both the benefits and disadvantages of this method of learning.

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[Sarah J Sneddon](#)
13 January 2016

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In my presentation, I will use PowerPoint with embedded video files and live performance to allow me to show how my playing has developed over the eight-week period. As the videos were created on a daily ad hoc basis, they capture the immediate response of a learner working with open resources. Using the experimental data I will explain, from the perspective of the learner, both the positives and negatives of learning an instrument in this way. Then, I will flip the discussion and consider, from my perspective as an instrumental teacher, what the experiment reveals about open educational resources and inclusion.

Extra content

Link to my H818 Poster - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOZv9pzT4KM>



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

13:47 on 20 January 2016 (Edited 13:47 on 20 January 2016)

[+ Add extra content](#)

Embedded Content

Josh Layne's Youtube channel (includes harp lessons)

[Josh Layne's Youtube channel \(includes harp lessons\)](#)

added by [Sarah J Sneddon](#)

Ray Pool's website - instructional (and inspirational videos) for harp

[Ray Pool's website - instructional \(and inspirational videos\) for harp](#)

added by [Sarah J Sneddon](#)

Chris Caswell's instructional videos for celtic harp

[Chris Caswell's instructional videos for celtic harp](#)

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Clive Morely harps - a commercial site which contains lots of useful information for harpists

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added by [Sarah J Sneddon](#)

Harp Column - information and fora

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Bulletproofmusician - a website which discusses 'mental practice'

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[Anita Houghton](#)

11:40am 17 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Sarah

I am looking forward to seeing your presentation and hearing your conclusions from both learner and teacher perspective. Your project has always struck me as very tidy and logically and therefore I am struggling to add anything which you may find of valuable.

Some general ponderings.

- How may the 'App' generation respond differently? This morning my daughter had found a music 'App' on her tablet which basically was a game of touching the correct buttons to play the tune. The tune, pachebel's Cannon, a tune that most would recognise (from either weddings or funerals, I think I have heard it at both!). I suggested that she perhaps locates the music and start to learn the tune on the keyboard. So we looked on the internet and found the music, worked out the notes, it was difficult. End result she got board and reverted back to the tablet. The App was a lot easier and she considered she was still playing the tune.

- Do people have to be musically inclined to be able to learn an instrument through OER's.

- What's next for your work? Is there a possibility of doing wider experiments with a group, different instruments? Could you locate the OER and point people in the right direction? A website which pulled together your favourite OER's for different instruments as recommended by a music teacher?



[Elaine Dalloway](#)

11:58am 17 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Sarah

You've obviously put a lot of research and hard work into this and are very motivated. I think it would be easier for some to work this way once they have the basics, particularly in the younger generation where instant access to answers is the norm.

I had piano lessons as a child, which helped me keep up (just) with a MOOC on Coursera on how to play guitar. There were time constraints but I wonder if I'd have been so motivated to keep up if I didn't have the basics before I started.

Looking forward to your presentation.

Elaine



[Anna Orridge](#)

5:08pm 18 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Sarah, I've tracked your progress with the videos with great interest and I'm looking forward to your presentation. The Abstract makes very clear what you intend to cover. Do you think that some instruments might be more suited to this method of learning than others? (I speak from a position of ignorance, but I would imagine that instruments which require particular breathing techniques or a very particular posture might be rather harder to learn via OERs.)



[Chris Gray](#)

9:12pm 22 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Sarah

I've been following your video clips from the start and they have been very inspirational. I've been most impressed with the regularity of your video postings and I like the way you have explored available resources, set a target and described your progress.

I'm interested to know your opinions of the limitations (if any) of the available OERs that you researched for your project.

Do you have any thoughts on how effective online video clips might be in teaching people specific gardening techniques, or other hands-on tasks?

Do you think that some reflective self-assessment questions could be used to complement the learning approach you have taken, or might this not be appropriate for the target audience?



[Callum Moore](#)

6:02pm 30 January 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Sarah,

It's been really interesting to see the journey you've been on with the harp. I'm looking forward to watching how it's gone. I used to play piano until I no longer had the time. It'd be interesting to consider whether learning online could help.

Out of curiosity, do you know how much someone would have learnt in the same period of time had they learnt in the traditional sense?



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

5:57pm 17 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Hi Sarah

Here is a summary of the questions/comments from your presentation - please respond as you wish:

- ▶ I've tried to learn the ukulele on my own. Books are good, but I miss being able to watch experienced performers up close. I wonder if OERs can fill that gap.
- ▶ I wonder how OER was defined, Sarah? I think you used lots of You Tube vids -- as a teacher yourself, you would have been able to decide relatively easily whether a resource was 'good', but I wonder if non-teachers would be able to discriminate (brings us to digital learning literacies...)
- ▶ How fascinating. I wonder what it was about the harp that made people believe that it was a good instrument for the visually impaired to learn? It's clearly very versatile, but a very bulky instrument.
What incentivised people on the fora to be so generous with their expertise?
- ▶ Is it just the joy of being a teacher and helping somebody?
- ▶ will you share those music sites please
- ▶ This is fascinating and the approach and experience of selecting which resources would work best is a transferrable skill for all sorts of other skills to be learned.
- ▶ Were there books that could have come from libraries (on loan).
- ▶ I think the lack of a critical listener is key. Is there any way this gap could be filled? A friend of mine is hoping to do keyboard lessons with kids via Skype.
- ▶ Should the adult learn with the child maybe?
Or is that too enthusiastic :)
- ▶ Will you make your final artefact accessible online?
- ▶ If we arm learners with the skills to develop their own learning plans, set their own goals and point them in the direction of searching for appropriate resources - what couldn't be learnt in this way?
- ▶ I agree - I think people who love sth want to share their enthusiasm for it and encourage others to do it.
- ▶ Not very many skills can't be learned in this way. But I suspect that sports and physical skills could be tricky without instructor and peers.
- ▶ there was an online community around Latin speaking established in the 1970s once online learning started - even though very clunky. Also some recent OER work on Dutch languages learning. Sharing when the opportunities are few may be turbo-powered?
- ▶ what is often missing from MOOCs is the teaching - the critical presence



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

9:08am 23 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Many Congratulations Sarah! Your presentation has been voted by delegates to be one of the most effective of the H818 Online Conference 2016 and you are officially one of our H818 Presentation Star Open Badge Winners! Please see how to Apply for your Badge here: <http://cloudworks.ac.uk/badge/view/33>

Well done!

Simon

H818 Conference Organiser



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:26am 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Some replies to conference questions (sorry for the delay - there's this thing called an EMA!).

I've tried to learn the ukulele on my own. Books are good, but I miss being able to watch experienced performers up close. I wonder if OERs can fill that gap.

Definitely. I had a quick look on YouTube and this channel looks very promising:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/TheUkuleleTeacher>

I particularly liked the fact that there was close up of the hand position superimposed in the right hand top corner of the screen.

Good luck!

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:29am 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

I wonder how OER was defined, Sarah? I think you used lots of You Tube vids -- as a teacher yourself, you would have been able to decide relatively easily whether a resource was 'good', but I wonder if non-teachers would be able to discriminate (brings us to digital learning literacies...)

I defined them as anything I could get from the computer for free (so quite a strict definition). I do think I had an built in advantage in that I could evaluate the materials quickly but the 'comments' can also help with this. You can also use an instrumental forum and ask for recommendations...

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:31am 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

How fascinating. I wonder what it was about the harp that made people believe that it was a good instrument for the visually impaired to learn? It's clearly very versatile, but a very bulky instrument.

I'm not an expert but I think that early harps (and modern day wire-stringed clarsachs) had two identically pitched central strings ('the sisters'). This means that someone who is blind can find their way round the instrument by touch. It's a bit like the 'bumps' on the F and J of the qwerty keyboard. You also have to remember that early harps were much smaller than the ones we tend to think about today.

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:34am 24 February 2016 (Edited 11:55am 24 February 2016) [Permalink](#)

What incentivised people on the fora to be so generous with their expertise?

Is it just the joy of being a teacher and helping somebody?

I agree - I think people who love sth want to share their enthusiasm for it and encourage others to do it.

I think it is the 'social object' phenomenon that we learned about on H818. I've seen similar generosity of the Ravelry knitting forum and also on the VW Type 4/Type 5 van forum (though I am a read-only member of both). When people get together to talk about their passion (whether it be harp or mechanics), it seems to breed goodwill and generosity. Of course, many of us just do have this compulsion to teach...

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:37am 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Will you share those music sites please?

They are now listed in OpenStudio in my project folder. They will also be part of my multimedia presentation which I'll share on Slideshare.

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:39am 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Were there books that could have come from libraries (on loan)?

I imagine so but because this course was the 'networked' practitioner I focussed on online resources. Bespoke harp music would certainly have made my job easier... I'm enjoying using them now that the experiment is over.

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:43am 24 February 2016 (Edited 12:13pm 24 February 2016) [Permalink](#)

I think the lack of a critical listener is key. Is there any way this gap could be filled? A friend of mine is hoping to do keyboard lessons with kids via Skype.

what is often missing from MOOCs is the teaching - the critical presence

There are definitely ways this could be filled. If the reason for using OERs was

geographical or financial (or even pressure of time), it would be possible to organise occasional Skype lessons or even attend workshops every now and again. OERs will, I think, work best as part of a patchwork of learning experiences.

This aspect of online learning wasn't part of my project but it is fascinating. Have a look at this link for further information:

<http://www.harpspectrum.org/harpworks/LongDistanceLessons.shtml>

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:52am 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

*Should the adult learn with the child maybe?
Or is that too enthusiastic :)*

Definitely not too enthusiastic... I think that kind of communal learning can work really well. I home-school my daughter and we do Latin together. It's not a subject I've studied in any depth so she loves the one upmanship and friendly competition. As 'the adult', I've got the study skills but as 'the child', she's got the sponge-like memory - things even out.

I honestly think what you suggest would be possible!

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:53am 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

Will you make your final artefact accessible online?

Yes. The project is going on the back burner now due to the pressures of work but I hope to have it up in Slideshare by August.

Sarah



[Sarah J Sneddon](#)

11:54am 24 February 2016 (Edited 12:00pm 24 February 2016) [Permalink](#)

If we arm learners with the skills to develop their own learning plans, set their own goals and point them in the direction of searching for appropriate resources - what couldn't be learnt in this way?

Not very many skills can't be learned in this way. But I suspect that sports and physical skills could be tricky without instructor and peers.

It's exciting, isn't it... There are so many things I'd love to learn and the material is all out there. All you need is time, energy and commitment.

Re. the sport issue - I think a lot depends on what you are trying to learn. For example, to

play ice-hockey you need team mates and ice (obviously) but there are some amazing off-ice skills YouTube videos out there. You could certainly supplement your ice-time with things like this:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pChiJ_cWZi0

Sarah



[Sarah J. Sneddon](#)

12:03pm 24 February 2016 [Permalink](#)

there was an online community around Latin speaking established in the 1970s once online learning started - even though very clunky. Also some recent OER work on Dutch languages learning. Sharing when the opportunities are few may be turbo-powered?

It's the 'long tail' issue, isn't it? Definitely one of the reasons that OERs are so exciting...

Sarah

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